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PRINCESS OR IMPOSTOR?

THE Princess Anastasia, youngest daughter of the last Czar of Russia, may have lived and died tragically. Or she may as some people maintain, have emerged from the wholesale assassination of her family by the bolsheviks in 1918 to survive to this day as "Madam Tchaikovsky," an ailing, protected recluse in a small Black Forest village. Therein lies one of the great mysteries of our time.

Is this the same woman?

Madame Tchaikovsky in her early 20's.

The Princess in her teens.

By a Special Correspondent

BUT there is no mystery about the eventful life of the play Anastasia, which J. C. Williamson are to present in Australia later this year.

Since the play had a tentative English try-out less than a year ago, it has swept from triumph to triumph and brought a fortune to the Paris society woman (Countess de Beedelievre), who first put the idea to paper under the pen-name of Mlle Marcelle Maurette.

In France, Anastasia created no furore. But it impressed English author Guy Bolton, who adapted it and sent it to John Counsell, prpducer of the Windsor Repertory Theatre.

Counsell, seeing in it a leading part for his actress wife Mary Kerridge, presented it for a limited run. On the first night it was seen by Michael Barry, television drama chief of the British Broadcasting Corporation, who put it on television with the same company.

Bought by Olivier

Vivien Leigh chanced to be "looking in" that night. She liked Anastasia so much she persuaded Sir Laurence Olivier to buy it. When Olivier produced it at the St. James Theatre, London, with Mary Kerridge in the name-part, Helen Haye as her co-star, and several of the original principals, the play was an immediate success.

It has since been bought by Warner Brothers for £stg20,000 as a Hollywood starring vehicle for Jane Wyman, and is currently being acted in several parts of the world.

What is the magic formula which has enabled Anastasia to girdle the globe in such a short while?

Well, the play contains many of the prime elements of good theatre, romance, drama, suspense, mystery, excitement, sensation, and a credible historical background—all plucked from real-life.

And its theme, loosely based on a genuine—though highly contentious — contemporary issue of breath-taking implications, is about as provocative as anything that has appeared behind footlights.

Princess Anastasia, says the play, was not murdered by the bolsheviks, as history records; she is alive today.

(Which is what "Madame Tchaikovsky" and her supporters have been saying for 30 years.)

She is, the play continues, a waif in Berlin, who is picked up by a syndicate of Russian swindlers. They plan to pass her off as Anastasia, and she proves such an adept pupil that she even crosses the most difficult hurdle of convincing the Dowager Empress of Russia.

Eventually it becomes clear that she is no poseuse, after all, but the real Anastasia. And she proves herself genuine by stepping out of the conspiracy at the moment of triumph, leaving the stage to the sound of the imperial anthem, followed by the adoring gaze of her grandmother.

So much for Anastasia of the play—a Royal Cinderella if ever there was one.

But what of the other Anastasia—the 19-year-old girl whom Berlin police saved from a suicide's grave in the murky Landwehr Canal one February night in 1920; and who, on the one hand addressed as "Your Imperial Highness" and on the other denounced as an impostor, has since split the Romanov family into two camps and been the subject of prolonged legal action that may not be finished yet?

After being lifted from the icy water of the canal, this creature of flesh and blood spent two years in the asylum at Dalldorf, either babbling incoherently or staring in wide-eyed silence at her doctors.

It was not until three years later that the world first heard her extraordinary claims.

By then she had been released from the asylum, gone into the home of a Russian-German emigre, a Baron von K., and subsequently been removed by a suspicious Berlin police chief.

Believed to have perished

The police chief had heard a peculiar rumor that cast doubts on the baron's motives in giving the girl sanctuary, so he took her into his own home. And there, month after month, he painstakingly extracted from her the fragments of a barely credible narrative.

Still nerve - shattered, wandering in mind, and occasionally collapsing as if with horror at the memory, the girl maintained one thing.

She was, she said, the Grand Duchess Anastasia, youngest daughter of Czar Nicholas II of Russia, who was believed to have perished with the rest of the Imperial family in the Siberian town of Ekaterinburg seven years before.

As many have done since, the police chief checked the girl's story with the historical version, whose grisly details had long been accepted as authentic.

How, on the night of July 16, 1918, the Czar, the Czarina, their son Alexis — the 14-year-old heir of the dynasty—and their four daughters, Olga, Tatiana, Marie and Anastasia (then 19), had been dragged into a cellar, brutally slaughtered with bullets and bayonets, then burned beyond recognition and their remains flung down an old mine-shaft.

The police chief was bewildered, but impressed.

"Tell me," he patiently pressed; "tell me, how did you manage to survive?"

Brokenly the girl blurted out the remainder of her tale.

On seeing her father shot, she had fainted, to recover consciousness in a peasant cart bound for the Rumanian frontier. Her rescuer was a Pole named Alexander Tchaikovsky, who told her he had been a member of the bolshevik murder-squad —against his will.

After the carnage in the cellar he had noticed her stirring on the floor. Quickly he covered her with a blanket and, later, succeeded in smuggling her away to his home.

Bathing her wounds — a head bruised by a rifle butt, a hand cut by a bayonet— he and his family had decided to get her over the frontier.

In secret, they reached Bucharest, where Anastasia gave birth to a child by her rescuer. She married Alexander and lived with him for a time on the proceeds of her jewellery, explaining that, like all the czar's children, she had kept this sewn into her clothing.

When Alexander was shot by Rumanian police during a street fracas, she and his brother went to Berlin in search of her mother's sister, Princess Henry of Hesse.

But, too ashamed to tell her aunt about her child and her marriage to a peasant, she had decided to end it all in the canal.

In the absence of the slightest tangible corroboration of this amazing preamble, the police chief arranged meetings between Anastasia, Princess Henry and others who had been familiar with the Russian court.

At first these encounters yielded nothing except scorn and condemnation. Then gradually other ghosts from Anastasia's past began to weave a different pattern.

Striking similarities

These visitors detected striking similarities between her and the grand duchess—the same height and coloring, the same slight deformity of the right foot, the same scar on the shoulder (where the grand duchess had had a mole removed by acid).

There were other significant indications, too, that Anastasia's claim could not be lightly dismissed as false.

Although it was easy to attribute her recognition of pictures of the czar's family, and her descriptions of the interior of their many palaces, to a good memory for photographs, that explanation could hardly account for her uncanny knowledge of little personal details, some of them closely guarded family secrets.

Romance with prince

That her sister Olga had had a romance with Prince Dimitri, for example—something known only to the closest relatives of each. Then her intimate description of how she had played with the young Prince of Wales (now the Duke of Windsor) during a visit to England. And her account of how, to stop her annoying a sailor on board the Russian royal yacht, her father had pulled her away by the hair.

These and other revelations produced a deep impression on many who had known the old imperial court.

But the sceptics' most potent argument remained: Why, if Anastasia were a Russian princess, did she not speak in her native tongue instead of in German?

A psychiatrist supplied the answer. The anomaly, he explained, was due to the shock of seeing her family murdered. Her subconscious mind had refused to accept such a ghastly event.

There were now two bitterly opposing factions, each determined to bring the matter to a head.

Leading the pro-Anastasias were her uncle, the Grand Duke Andrew, and the daughter of the czar's personal physician. Their vis-a-vis in the anti-camp were an aunt, the Grand Duchess Olga, and Pierre Pilliard, former tutor to the czar's children.

All through 1927 and 1928 members of the Romanov family attacked and vilified each other in the name of Anastasia. Wearying of the futility of it all, and still far from well, Anastasia went to America during the height of the controversy as a guest of the former Princess Xenia, her royal aunt, who had married a wealthy American.

Xenia believed the girl was her cousin. And under her affectionate care Anastasia regained her health.

But the end of 1928 brought a broadside across the Atlantic from the anti-Anastasia Romanovs. Two grand dukes, two grand duchesses and 12 other members of the family signed a declaration denouncing Anastasia as a fraud.

Immediately Xenia offered to devote her fortune to proving Anastasia's claim—to the title and the £stg200,000 said to be in English banks. Three months later she announced that she had decided not to fight any legal battle.

This brought another spanner into the arena. Mr Gleb Botkin, a son of the court surgeon who had been shot with the royal family.

Xenia, he said, was in no position to make such a decision on Anastasia's behalf. Anastasia must press her claim or the money would go to her aunts in England —the czar's sisters, the Grand Duchesses Olga and Xenia (who now live at Hampton Court, London, in one of the grace-and-favor homes set aside for needy gentlewomen).

Decision of court

But no action was taken in America, and in 1931 Anastasia returned to Germany, where she again went into a sanitorium, this time for tuberculosis.

During the next eight years a Hamburg lawyer collected an avalanche of documentary evidence on her behalf. Then, at last, in 1939, Anastasia's claim came before a German court. It was rejected — mainly because photographs showed that her ears were of different shape from those of the grand duchess.

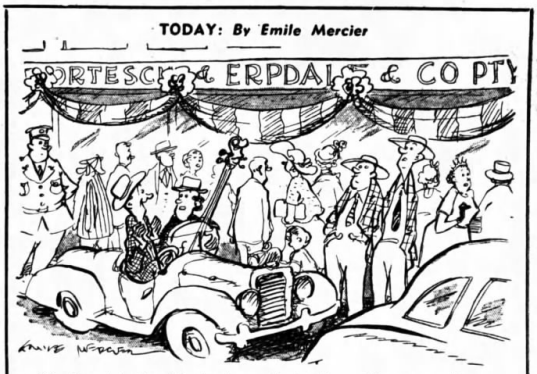
The chaos of World War II disorganised both camps. Anastasia, released from the sanitorium, went to live in the Black Forest. She is there today, a semi-invalid of 52, her exact whereabouts and her identity known only to her intimate friends.

She still insists "I am the grand duchess" but time and frustration have withered her longing for recognition.

Yet her friends continue to gather scraps of evidence, cherishing the day when the impartial judgment of an English court shall proclaim to the world that Anastasia and "Madame Tchaikovsky" are one and the same — neither dupe nor charlatan, but the miraculously saved daughter of the last Czar of Imperial Russia.

It is a dream that will probably never materialise, for all the fervent hopes of romantics.

TODAY: *By Emile Mercier*



● "You know, I don't want to stop here really, but I saw this vacant parking space and I just couldn't resist it."

THE ROMANOV MYSTERY

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